Nova et Vetera

SALERNO: ITS MEDICAL SCHOOL AND ITS MEDICAL LEGENDS

Salerno, the first important town on the European continent to be occupied by the Allies, has a special place in medical affection. It is the site of the earliest "modern" medical school. Its very name conjures up romance. A note on the school and on some of its early legends may be welcome.

During the "Dark Ages"—that is, from about A.D. 400 to about 1200—the great tradition of Hippocrates and Galen faded. All theoretical medical knowledge lapsed. Even the bare elements of anatomy were forgotten. Prognosis became a childish rule of thumb; therapeutics a ridiculous and disgusting drug list; medicine a collection of formulae punctuated by more or less sacred incantations. Yet there was one area where a slightly higher standard prevailed. In South Italy dialects of Greek were spoken, and there a faint travesty of the ancient medical learning still lingered. This was notably the case at Salerno. Of physicians in its neighbourhood we get a few glimpses in the eighth and ninth centuries. By the middle of the tenth century the fame of the place as a medical centre had reached far afield.

Many romantic legends have gathered round the name. Fancy has promoted the "ladies of Salerne" into the first corporation of women doctors. The first modern anatomical text is Salernitan, and it appropriately substitutes the structure of the pig for that of man. The most famous of medical poems, the "Salerne School," has been turned into every language. Some of the MSS. are addressed to "England's king," held to be William the Conqueror's eldest son, Robert of Normandy (1054-1134), who was certainly in Salerno in 1098. Two of the opening lines of the poem are known to all:

> "Use three physicians still. First Doctor Quiet,
> Next Doctor Merryman, and Doctor Diet."

Perhaps the oddest of the Salerno legends ascribes the foundation of the school to four practitioners—a Greek, a Latin, an Arab, and a Jew. None of the current romantic stories about the early days of Salerno is even approximately true, but the last, suggesting a mixture of four cultures in this region, does faintly reflect an actual situation.

A Battleground of Interests

After the fall of the Gothic power in the sixth century South Italy became for centuries a battleground of conflicting interests. It was a mosaic of small States, usually under the nominal rule of Byzantium and influenced by a variety of cultures. Invaders from the north seldom reached the south, and Byzantium, securely ensconced on the Adriatic seaboard, disputed the mastery with native chiefs and, from the eighth century onward, with Saracens also. The prevailing language was largely Greek, of which the colloquial speech bears traces to this day. The imperfect grasp of the Byzantines, however, gave opportunity for entry of other tongues. Latin dialects were spoken in many places. In others Greek dialects were replaced by forms of Arabic patois. Moreover, material and literary remains tell of a vigorous development of a Hebrew culture in this region. We devote a few sentences to the little-known Saracen and Jewish elements.

In the seventh century the dominion of the Crescent had extended along the southern shores of the Mediterranean, from the Red Sea to the Atlantic. In 711 Tarik crossed into Spain with a Berber army and gave his name, the Mount of Tarik—Gebel Tarik—to the natural fortress the title of which has been corrupted into Gibraltar. This movement that carried Islam across the narrow Strait of Gibraltar threw it across the wider Sicilian Channel in the eighth century and on to the mainland in the ninth. In 827 the Emir of Kairouan in Tunisia began a systematic invasion. Palermo fell in 831 and was a strong base for raids on the Italian coasts. Things moved more slowly in those days than in these, but in 846 the arms of the Crescent were carried to Rome itself. At Salerno and elsewhere Saracen colonies were established.

For our knowledge of the Jewish element in South Italy at this period we have a Hebrew chronicle from 850 to 1060, telling of many Jewish settlements in the Salerno area, and a Hebrew medical work of about 950. But above all we have the extensive Latin writings bearing the name of Constantine the African. He was an Arabic speaker who made a long stay in Salerno, was converted to Christianity, and became a monk at the ancient Benedictine house of Monte Cassino. Constantine died in 1087. He spent much of the last ten years of his life turning into Latin, with help of a local scribe, medical works of certain Jewish physicians of Kairouan. At the same time an Archbishop of Salerno was engaged in translating medical works of Greek into Latin. Constantine himself is said to have acted as the oriental secretary of the Norman invader of Salerno.

End of the Great Medical Period

These literary events were contemporary with the Norman conquest of Sicily and South Italy, which was itself contemporary with the Norman conquest of England. There was some intercourse between Salerno and England, and one of the few surviving Anglo-Saxon medical texts, written soon after the Norman Conquest, is a translation of a Salernitan document. This was the great period of the medical school of Salerno. During the twelfth century Bologna, and later Padua, became the chief medical centre. In 1224 a university was formally instituted as a rival to papal Bologna by Frederick II, the great enemy of the Papacy, at Naples. This was fatal to the neighbouring medical school at Salerno and its importance began immediately to wane. Literary activity continued there to some extent and the school prolonged an ever more enfeebled existence to the very end of the eighteenth century. Gradually, however, it became a place of bogus degrees and not very authentic ancient memories. Napoleon closed it finally in 1811. Since then its literature and its legendary associations have provided much fruitful material for medical historians, and not a little for writers of romance—medical and other.

C. S.

Correspondence

Early Recognition of Cancer

SIR,—Everybody will agree with your correspondent Dr. Joseph Walter (Sept. 4, p. 313) concerning the necessity for making the public cancer-conscious. I would, however, like to point out that for four years before the war the British Empire Cancer Campaign had been carrying out work on this subject through its Central Propaganda Committee by means of educational publications and lectures. In 1936 arrangements were made by the Campaign for lectures to be given to the laity, and these were only discontinued because of the war. During those four years 35 counties were covered and in all 1,256 lectures were given to audiences totalling 57,851—i.e., an average attendance of 46. The lectures were given by medical men after they had been "briefed" by the committee and given skeleton lectures on which to base their own talks. The audiences consisted largely of members of the Women's Institutes, Townswomen's Guilds, National Council for Women, British Legion, Rotary Clubs, Toc H, etc. At the lectures nearly 750,000 educational leaflets were distributed.

When the suggestion was first made that lay lectures should be given there was considerable opposition on the ground that cancer phobia would be caused among the public. The very numerous spontaneous letters received from individuals in the audiences who attended these lectures convinced the committee that this was not true, and indeed it is quite obvious that knowledge is the only way of getting rid of cancer phobia which afflicts so many human beings. Although it is hoped that the Campaign will be able to carry on this work after the war, nevertheless I feel that this very important method of getting early diagnosis will have to be taken on by the organizations which will be set up under the new Cancer Act.—I am, etc.,

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British Empire Cancer Campaign.